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### Citation

Russell, James R. 2017. "A Note on Balaam's Chimaera." *Iran and the Caucasus* 21 (1) (March 15): 39–45. doi:10.1163/1573384x-90000004.

### Published Version

doi:10.1163/1573384X-90000004

### Permanent link

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## A Note on Balaam's Chimaera.

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Numbers 22-24 tells the story of the pagan prophet Balaam (Heb. Bil'am). The Israelites were approaching the Promised Land, defeating one enemy after another— Sihon the Amorite, then Og the king of Bashan. Tradition makes the latter an antediluvian giant; and Psalm 136, which has become a part of Shacharit, the Jewish morning liturgy, pairs them in one verse of a litany praising God's goodness. So as the Children of Israel, having defeated every enemy in their way, were nearing the realm of Balak, king of Moab, he summoned Balaam from Petor "on the river (Euphrates)" to come and curse them. That is a considerable distance from Moab, Balaam was a famous prophet to whom the true God in fact spoke— the real deal, as one might say colloquially. God thereupon warned Balaam not to accept this mission, but he mounted his she-ass anyway and set off to serve his Moabite client. Thrice an angel visible only to the soothsayer's donkey stood in the way, thrice the ass stopped or turned, and thrice Balaam beat her with a stick. God then opened her mouth in human speech and she protested this harsh treatment; Balaam retorted that he would have killed her, had only he a sword. *Va-tomer ha-aton el Bil'am ha-lo anokhi atonkha asher rakhavta 'alai me'odkha 'ad ha-yom ha-zeh, ha-hasken hiskanti la-'asot lekha koh va-yomer lo.* "The she-ass said to Balaam, 'Am I not your she-ass whom you have ridden often till this day, and was it my custom to do this to you?' and he said, 'No.'" The angel then revealed himself to Balaam as well, but it made no difference. Balaam went on his way and thrice tried to curse the Israelites but each time God made him bless them instead. In the third blessing are the words that open a prayer at the beginning of the morning liturgy, *Ma tovu 'ohalekha Ya'aqov mishkenotekha Yisrael*, "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob; your dwelling places, O Israel!" It is the only verse in Hebrew prayer spoken by a non-Jew, though it has all the hallmarks of a Psalmic composition.<sup>1</sup>

Twice in the episode— first on the road to Moab and then at the ritual of cursing— there is a threefold repetition typical of oral storytelling. The angel blocks the donkey thrice; thrice Balaam tries to curse Israel and blesses it instead. This feature also, like the form of Balaam's blessing, has precedent in the Bible: among other examples are God's summoning of Abraham ("Take your son, your only son, whom you love— Isaac!") and His epiphany to Elijah ("And now God passed, and there was a great and strong wind splitting mountains and shattering rocks before God. God was not in the wind. And after the wind was a noise. God was not in the

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<sup>1</sup> Balaam's famous blessing displays that parallelism of a verse couplet long recognized as typical of Hebrew poetry— preeminently the Psalms. This feature is common to northwest Semitic verse generally and remained so till the end of Antiquity: Prof. Charles Krahmalkov, "Two Neo-Punic Poems in Rhymed Verse," *Rivista di Studi Fenici* 3, 1975, discerned it in inscriptions from Mactar, and in a three-verse lyric poem in Neo-Punic in Latin letters from the *limes Tripolitania* ("When He Drove out Yrirachan": A Phoenician (Punic) Poem, ca. A.D. 350," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 294 (May 1994)).

noise. And after the noise was a fire. God was not in the fire. And after the fire was a still small voice (*qol demama daqa*)— and when Elijah heard it...”). Such repetitions at the very least are a code whose narrative quality is to build a kind of anticipated suspense for the reader or listener. They can bear the more serious weight also of textual strategies, layering a single picture as it were and thereby indicating subtle variations that invite further and deeper reflection. In the case of the passage from Genesis, which is part of the *‘Aqeda*, the binding of Isaac (a pericope read in its entirety as part of the same Shacharit prayers that include Balaam’s blessing), the literary scholar Erich Auerbach famously argued in *Mimesis* that the terseness of the episode serves as the catalyst to the reader’s inquisitive commentary. The thrice-repeated summons is the means for this. God addresses Abraham first on the physical level (Take your son— already important, given Abraham’s advanced age); then the legal (Take your *only* son—he has another, Ishmael, but the latter though elder is Abraham’s son by the slave woman Hagar); then the psychological (Whom you *love*, then specifying Isaac by name). The three-part command thus addresses all that a son means to Abraham, starting from the plain physical facts and proceeding upwards towards the mental and spiritual ones: his physical progeny, his legal heir, the child to whom he is psychologically and spiritually attached. This underscores the severity of the demanded sacrifice.

In the passage on Elijah, it is not the threefold *Sturm und Drang* of a weather god (cf. Ps. 29, with its Ugaritic precursor) that draws the prophet out of his cave, but a subtle, articulate voice. In the case of the story of Balaam the three blessings build on each other, achieving a cumulative power. But it is the talking donkey that will probably attract the attention of a listener attuned to the art of storytelling, for talking animals are a mainstay of folklore. Horses converse with each other in the *Iliad* of Homer; and epic heroes speak with their articulate steeds— the Iranian Rostam, to Rakhsh; and the Armenian heroes of the Sasun cycle, to K’urkik Jelali. In the Ancient Near East people rode donkeys before they first encountered the horse— a creature they tellingly first called in Akkadian the “ass of the mountains (of Western Iran).”<sup>2</sup> The donkey is strong, perceptive, and sexually potent, and mythical and magical donkeys reflect these characteristics. Middle Eastern lore about the ass (Hebrew *chamor*, Arabic *himar*) crosses the Aegean to shape the Greek *chimaera*. The Prophets tend to associate horses with the overweening pride of the violent infidel: the *locus classicus* is the Song of Moses in *Exodus*, where God casts

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<sup>2</sup> In Armenian the reflex of Indo-European *\*ekwos*, “horse” (cf. Latin *equus*, Greek *hippos*), a word meaning “swift”, is *esh*, which became the word for a donkey (cf. the loan from Armenian into Turkish, *eshek*). The word for horse is *dzi*, “driven, impelled”, which is parallel to a metaphoric, honorific designation, *hayah*, in Sanskrit. Indo-European poetic language often uses such terms to designate successive grades: the merely physical, then the noble, then the divine, rather as we might distinguish between nag, horse, and steed. That is probably the explanation of Homer’s occasional mention of the different names men and gods give to a plant or a river. But it may be that the earliest speakers of Armenian were migrants from a land where they had horses to a place where the horse was yet unknown— cf. the Akkadian “ass of the mountains”— and the common equid was the donkey. (See J.R. Russell, “Two Armenian Toponyms: Hrasekaberd and Ishayr,” *Annual of Armenian Linguistics* 9, 1988, pp. 281-287.)

Egyptian horse and rider (*sus ve-rokhvo*: “rider” here probably is a charioteer) into the sea. Christ, following prophecy, rode a donkey into Jerusalem.

But the Babylonian Talmud took shape in Iranian Mesopotamia in the Arsacid and Sasanian periods, when a great or noble man, Jew or gentile, might be expected to ride a horse. Mordecai is mounted on a royal steed as a reward for his service in the Book of Esther, which is very much a Persian romance; and on the fresco in Parthian style in the synagogue at Dura-Europos the scene is carefully depicted. There is also an unrelated doodle on the wall of the synagogue showing a fully armored knight galloping on his charger. This is familiar from the massive Sasanian triumphal reliefs of about the same period. Of Rabbi Yehuda I, the *Resh Galuta* (Exilarch), the Babylonian Talmud says, *Ahōrērē dā-Rabbī ‘atīr mi-Shābūr mālkā*, “The Rabbi’s stable-master [using a Persian loan word, *akhwarrbed*] was richer than king Shapur.” So Tractate *‘Avoda Zara* 4b of the Babylonian Talmud inserts an episode in which the Moabite emissaries ask Balaam why he is riding a donkey instead of a horse: he replies that he usually does but today they are all out to pasture. The donkey speaks up and retorts that Balaam does not just use her to haul burdens but rides her, and not just occasionally. Moreover, *She-ani ‘osah lekha rekhivut ba-yom ve-ishut ba-laila*, “I provide you with riding by day and with coitus as a wife by night.” Prof. Reuven Kipperwasser notes that Mar Zutra says Balaam practiced magic with his *membrum virile* (*qosem be amto haya*) and Mar the son of Rabina adds that he practiced intercourse with his donkey. Here the elaboration of the tale builds on phallic magic and the donkey’s sexual aspects, while underscoring and ridiculing the sexual immorality of the pagan prophet. Such obscene ridicule is found elsewhere in the Talmud.<sup>3</sup>

Balaam beats his disobedient donkey with a stick, and later adds that if he had had a **sword** with him he would have slain her. Threatening a preternaturally intelligent donkey with an iron weapon instead of an ordinary whip belongs to a mythological topos that seems to have been drawn into *Numbers* in the composition of the Balaam story, which, as we have seen, employs strategies of oral storytelling. Iron is often in magical belief the material most potent against evil spirits: there is a widespread belief in the child-stealing witch called Lilith, Al, and other names— a woman in childbed should have an iron implement such as a pair of scissors along with a written talisman against the demon.<sup>4</sup> Nearly a quarter century ago I discussed in an article on the *hushkaparik*, an Armenian mythological *Mischwesen*

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<sup>3</sup> For Talmudic phallic ribaldry mocking Pharaoh, see J.R. Russell, “A Note on Armenian *hrmštk-el*,” in Uwe Bläsing, Victoria Arakelova, and Matthias Weinreich, eds., *Studies on Iran and the Caucasus in Honour of Garnik Asatrian*, Leiden: Brill, 2015, pp. 365-371. Kipperwasser noticed a passage in Gemara with the Iranian loan *framashatak*, meaning “penis”: I proposed that a verbal derivation in Armenian became innocuous over time, acquiring the general meaning “to push, shove in”. Hrach Martirosyan, an extremely learned and highly and original specialist in Armenian linguistics, does not accept this etymology and has since suggested another, “native” explanation of *hrmshkel* combining two verbs meaning “to push” (with Arm. *hr-el*) as an intensified form.

<sup>4</sup> See discussion with sources in J.R. Russell, “The Armenian Magical Scroll and Outsider Art,” *Iran and the Caucasus* 15.1-2, 2011, pp. 5-47.

(mixed-creature or composite, like a winged bull or lion, for instance) that is part donkey, an incident in the eleventh chapter of the *History of Siunik* of Step'anos Orbelean involving a holy man, a talking donkey, and a metal weapon: "And another thing. On the other side of the river was a mill. The blessed Tirot always crossed himself at deep spots, and then forded the stream without fear. One day he saw a desirable, lovely young ass and thought to himself, 'I'll ride that ass across the river.' So he mounted it and they began to ford the river, when the ass turned around to reveal a glittering set of iron teeth, and asked, 'Have you seen donkey's teeth such as these?' So he took his dagger from its sheath, brandished it, and relied, 'And have you seen this kind of donkey-whip [*kharazan*, an Iranian loan]? Take me across, or else I'll strike and wound you!' After carrying him to the far bank, the evil Satan vanished. The saint performed many other miracles..."<sup>5</sup> In a survey of Armenian demonology rehearsing a great deal of my previous work, Prof. Garnik Asatrian importantly added to the dossier a note on a demon of Central and Southwestern Iran that is called by various names locally interpreted as *mard-āzmā*, "man-tester". It appears as a donkey to people needing a ride, takes them to a precipice, and bares its iron teeth. The rider must then take a sharp iron object and ask it, "Have you seen this kind of whip?" Then it will disappear.<sup>6</sup>

The Iranian myth is without a doubt the proximal source of the Armenian anecdote about the blessed Tirot; and although the horse came to the Middle East from the mountains of Iran, that country has donkeys aplenty on the land and in the literature, and the Persian language is replete with expressions alluding to the sexual imagery of the donkey.<sup>7</sup> The *midrashim* on Balaam reflect an Iranian milieu as well. However one finds already in the Torah, in the story of Balaam, the elements of magician (or holy man), disobedient talking donkey, and iron implement (as apotropaic whip or weapon), all together. Overt sexual overtones are absent from the story but are inferred by many commentators. Chronological priority would suggest, then, that this mythological *topos* is probably not originally of Iranian origin but derives from ancient Semitic lore. At the very least, its earliest written

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<sup>5</sup> See J.R. Russell, "The Mother of All Heresies: A Late Mediaeval Armenian Text on the *Yuškaparik*," *Revue des Etudes Arméniennes* 24, 1993, pp. 273-293.

<sup>6</sup> Garnik Asatrian, "Armenian Demonology: A critical overview," *Iran and the Caucasus* 17, 2013, pp. 9-25. Prof. Asatrian disagrees there with one's idea, advanced in *Zoroastrianism in Armenia*, 1987, that the name of the Armenian house spirit called Shvot derives from an Iranian loan, *shahapet* "ruler of a realm, tutelary divinity", preferring the Semitic month name Shevat. This is a sensible and necessary addition to the explanation of the problem, but I would not find it acceptable as an alternative that would entirely **exclude** the *shahapet*. I have since offered a more complex and nuanced solution, suggesting that the two in fact are **fused** to form the character of the mythical being. See J.R. Russell, "An Armenian Spirit of Time and Place: the *Švot*," *Revue des Etudes Arméniennes* 36 (2014-2015), pp. 13-59. The myth of the Shvot involves peripherally the rhyming pair of Egyptian magicians who confronted Moses, Jannes and Jambres— in the aforementioned article I note that according to one tradition they are princes of Midian and none other than the sons of Balaam!

<sup>7</sup> The disparaging and lilingly alliterative Persian expression *kīr-e khar*, "membrum of a donkey" has been so commonplace for so long that it is even used in a rude colophon to a Sogdian manuscript; and a variety of mushroom is known by the diminutive *kīr-e kharak*.

attestation is in the famous Biblical episode of Balaam. In the Iranian oikotype of the myth, the asinine demon is one that *tests* a man: perhaps it tried him for his moral probity. That is the aspect the Talmudic treatment of the motif illuminates for us. If he withstood its blandishments and refrained from bestiality, then he passed the test and the satanic being melted away. That would explain why the Armenian reflex of the myth tellingly has a holy man, and not just any wayfarer. So perhaps the tale of Balaam, told and elaborated by the Jews of Sasanian Mesopotamia and Iran, made its way into Iranian folklore and from thence traveled to the stock of medieval storytelling of Christian Armenia.